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E.O. 12958: DECL: AFTER KOREAN REUNIFICATION  
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KS](#)  
SUBJECT: PRESIDENT ROH'S INFORMAL COMMENTS ON OPCON, NORTH  
KOREA, USG, AND DOMESTIC POLITICS

Classified By: A/DCM Joseph Y. Yun. Reasons 1.4 (b/d).

¶1. (C) Summary and Comment: On August 13, President Roh Moo-hyun hosted a dinner for several newspapers which are considered "friendly" to the Roh Administration, including Hankyoreh, KyungHyang and Seoul Shinmun. Over the course of the dinner, Roh made frank comments on a number of issues, including OPCON, the U.S.-ROK alliance, North Korea, FTA and domestic politics. In Korea, there is no such thing as off-the-record, especially when journalists are involved. Some of the discussion is now making the rounds. The following transcript was given to us by an editor who participated in the dinner.

¶2. (C) Roh's penchant for frank talk has gotten him in trouble many times. This is no exception. Roh's open admission that he sees ROK forces as aimed at countering the Japanese and Chinese, rather than the North Korean forces is astounding. Many Koreans would say they are not surprised that he has such views, but they are still shocked that he would verbalize them with the press. Roh's virtual admission that he is a lame duck is depressing to many in the Administration, who believe that there's still some work to do with seventeen months left in Roh's term. The main image that comes across from these remarks is a president who feels he has been defeated and under appreciated. End Summary and Comment.

-OPCON-

¶3. (SBU) The OPCON transfer is being pursued based on our discussions with the United States. The conservative press, however, is assuming the offensive on the issue, although they called for it ten year ago. (Roh expressed his hostility towards the conservative media.) It is important to follow the official statements of the United States government. It is rare for the U.S. government to express its position on the U.S.-ROK alliance because its statements could become the subject of debate. But, the Department of Defense and Department of State are coming out and expressing their positions. We should not postpone our consultations with the U.S. on the issue. Many of the critics question the issue of the ROK military capabilities. But we are trying to promote the ROK's military capabilities to have a prepared defense posture against Japan and China, not against North Korea. The Ministry of National Defense (MND) is in great need of equipping itself with the defense equipment that Japan has. Talk on the North Korea deterrent misses the main point of the issue. (Roh talked about the backwardness of

North Korea by mentioning what he saw in Pyongyang.) There will not be a defense gap after the OPCON transfer. The fundamental nature of military sovereignty is to exercise what we have.

-OPLAN 5029-

¶4. (SBU) We have to rework the details of OPlan 5029. The current plan fundamentally focuses on U.S. forces going into the North and taking control of the situation. The situation would become serious if this happens to be the case. China does not want U.S. forces coming near its border with the North. There is also the concern that the U.S. and China will compete over North Korea (without discussing this with the ROK) if there is an emergency situation in the country. The North has not yet mentioned this during inter-Korean military talks, but it is necessary to be prepared for a situation where the North brings up the OPCON transfer issue during military talks.

-NORTH KOREAN NUCLEAR ISSUE AND SIX PARTY TALKS-

¶5. (SBU) There is nothing that we can do at the moment. We have no choice but to pass the issue to the next administration. Meanwhile, we have to manage the situation so that it will not change for the worse. I feel frustrated. Chief Secretary Song Min-soon says that we should still do what we can, but that's how I feel right now.

¶6. (SBU) The United States is trying to bring about a collapse of the Kim Jong-il regime, so it is difficult to communicate our position. On the other hand, North Korea is stubborn. South Korea is stuck in the middle. We do not have enough information on North Korea so there were many times when our judgments had been inaccurate. The National Intelligence Service (NIS) also does not know much about the North. The official inter-Korean channel is the most accurate source of information for us. We had tried in the past to use unofficial channels to get information, without any success. We were also unable to verify whether the unofficial channel was what Kim Jong-il wanted. I still think that there would be a chance if we meet Kim Jong-il like last year's meeting between then-Unification Minister Chung Dong-young and Kim Jong-il. That is why I would like to keep Minister Lee Jong-seok; I think he is the most reliable channel in directly dealing with the North. If a new person replaces him, it would be difficult to judge what the North is thinking.

¶7. (SBU) It does not seem that China is seriously worried about the North acquiring nuclear weapons. They do not seem to evaluate the North's nuclear technology very highly.

¶8. (SBU) The North Korean threat has more to do with the North's relations with other countries rather than its nuclear technology. The North Korean case is similar to the Indian case, but I do not understand why India is allowed to have nuclear weapons (while the North is not). Do the South Korean people feel insecure because the United States has nuclear weapons? In addition, India and Iran are interested in acquiring nuclear weapons, while North Korea is interested in selling its nuclear technology.

¶9. (SBU) Q: What would happen if the United States and China authorize South Korea to negotiate with the North?

¶A. That will never happen with the United States. If there was such a possibility, the United States would directly negotiate with the North. The U.S. perceives North Korea as barbarous. It is like the U.S. is trying to enforce the rules of civilization (i.e., democracy, market economy) on savages. But the more important issue here is the question of fairness. The United States does not treat the North fairly.

-U.S. ADMINISTRATION-

¶10. (SBU) It is difficult to talk with the Bush

administration on security issues. I was more convinced on this matter after recently seeing the United States, attitude toward Israel. The situation was OK from the Chung-Kim meeting to the Sept. 19 Joint Statement, but the situation changed after the United States took up the BDA issue.

¶11. (SBU) Strangely, I think President Bush personally likes me. I think this is an asset.

#### -DOMESTIC POLITICS-

¶12. (SBU) The issue of defense reforms is a very difficult. I would not have thought of pursuing defense reforms if it were not for Defense Minister Yoon Kwang-Ung. The researchers at the defense-related governmental think-tanks were all hired by their predecessors. We have to change these people, but that is difficult at the moment.

¶13. (SBU) When I first went to the Ministry of National Defense (MND) after I came into office, I got the impression that MND officials were mocking me. When I heard their simple comparison of the ROK,s and North Korea,s military capabilities, I received the impression that these people were thinking that I was just an ordinary person visiting the MND. The ROK military,s perception is much behind the times.

¶14. (SBU) I had not been worried about my popularity until recently. Because of this it would be difficult to carry out any reforms during the time that is left, so I am thinking about just managing affairs. I am even thinking about publicly declaring this to the South Korean public.

¶15. (SBU) I do not know what I have done wrong. If it is a question of style, there is nothing much we can do about it. I would like someone to specifically point out what I,m doing wrong. Issues like polarization, irregular employment, income distribution are all problems where we see progress, but it is true that these problems remain unresolved. This would be the same with the next administration. I have carried out reforms within the administration and have worked toward changing the Blue House system. The only new issue that has emerged during my tenure is the issue of the adult video gambling rooms. But the nature of the issue prevents the Blue House from getting directly involved in handling the problem.

¶16. (SBU) Right now, I feel conflicted between the thought of giving up and doing my best to improve the situation before I leave office. It is true that I go back and forth between these two thoughts. That does not mean, however, that I am inattentive to state affairs and management.

¶17. (SBU) Chosun, JoongAng, and Dong-A (three largest circulating newspapers) all try to drag me down. The press reflects the power of the people, but these three newspapers have become synonymous with political power. The press needs to be broad-minded in order to reflect the power of the people, but these three do not even follow this principle. I ask my people to give me a report every morning on what these papers say. I will make sure that the influence of these three newspapers fall, even if this means my popularity rate will fall as well. This will also be better for my successor.

¶18. (SBU) It is less of a burden for me because the OPCON transfer issue is becoming more of an issue than the U.S.-Korea FTA issue.

¶19. (SBU) It would be more difficult for me if 1,000 people who had shared my thoughts were to have demonstrations calling for my resignation than 10,000 conservatives demonstrating.

#### -US-ROK FTA-

¶20. (SBU) This is an option where we can be winners. It is possible to respond to potential agricultural damages. One-third of the agricultural industry is competitive, the

other third would become competitive through governmental assistance, and the last third is not competitive.

¶21. (SBU) It is also important how we are treated by stronger countries. The United States picked South Korea as a FTA partner among 25 countries that had proposed a FTA with the U.S. (Roh joked afterwards that some people could call him pro-American if they heard him say this.)  
STANTON